



NOAA FISHERIES

A Fish by Any Other Name

Pollock is Pollock

According to the American Fisheries Society, the scientific name for Alaska pollock has changed. But it will take several years for all the agencies that regulate trade in seafood products to update their nomenclature. In the meantime, it's business as usual.



A juvenile Alaska pollock, *Gadus chalcogrammus*. Photo by Ingrid Spies.

According to the American Fisheries Society, the generally accepted arbiter of scientific nomenclature for fishes in North America, the scientific name for Alaska pollock has changed. The species formerly known as *Theragra chalcogramma* should now be identified as *Gadus chalcogrammus*. This change places Alaska pollock in the same genus as the Atlantic, Pacific, and Greenland cods.

Although the scientific name has changed, the common name for Alaska pollock is still Alaska pollock. Or walleye pollock, if you prefer.

Many regulations, tariffs, and trade quotas refer to seafood products using their scientific names. Therefore, this change will eventually require buyers and sellers of Alaska pollock to change their labels and shipping documents. However, it will take several years for regulatory and trade agencies around the world to update their codes. In the meantime, buyers and sellers of Alaska pollock should continue business as usual.

You may have some questions. Here are a few answers...

Why has the scientific name for Alaska pollock changed?

Historically, most species were classified based on appearance and behavior, and judging by these, pollock is not a very close cousin of cod. Cod as we have known them are robust, girthy bottom-dwellers whereas pollock are smaller, more slender, and live higher in the water column. Based on these and other differences, pollock had been assigned its own genus, *Theragra*.

But looks can be deceiving. DNA sequencing has revealed that, despite appearances, Alaska pollock are closely related to Atlantic cod. In fact, Alaska pollock are closer to Atlantic cod than Pacific cod are to Atlantic cod. Reassigning Alaska pollock to the cod genus, *Gadus*, is consistent with the best scientific evidence available at this time.

Wouldn't it be easier if we could just continue to use the old name?

A scientific name is more than just a name. It's also a pointer to the exact location of an organism on the tree of life. Knowing that location, you can identify an organism's nearest relatives and see how it evolved to be the way it is today.

That information is crucial when managing fish populations. For instance, if scientists lack data on the life history of a certain species—when it reaches sexual maturity, how many eggs it produces, and so on—they might reasonably fill that gap using data from a closely related species. To do that, they need to know how species relate to each other. Scientific names are the keys to those relationships.

Ok, the scientific name has changed. Has the common name changed as well?

No, and it might never change, as common names are separate from scientific names.

What does this mean for sales in the United States?

In the United States, the Food and Drug Administration enforces regulations to ensure that seafood is properly labeled. The FDA's [Seafood List](#) spells out the scientific names for fish species and the acceptable market names for each.

When the FDA updates its Seafood List with the new scientific name for Alaska pollock, the acceptable market names will remain the same: Alaska pollock, walleye pollock, and pollock. Sellers and distributors in the U.S. market should continue business as usual in order to remain in compliance with FDA regulations.

Any changes to the FDA's Seafood List will be noted on their [Seafood List Guidance page](#).

What does this mean for international trade?

Many customs duties and trade quotas are based on the Harmonized System codes, a.k.a HS codes, published by The World Customs Organization. HS codes are based on scientific names.

The WCO updates the HS nomenclature every five years, with the next update scheduled for 2017. However, that update has already been drafted. It is therefore likely that the new scientific name for Alaska pollock won't be included until the 2022 update to the HS codes.

In the meantime, buyers and sellers of Alaska pollock should continue business as usual.

So what you're saying is, I should do nothing, right?

That's right. Don't change your labels and don't change your codes. For the time being, it's business as usual.

How will I know when I need to take action?

In addition to the FDA website listed above, NOAA Fisheries will post any new information on this name change to the following web address:

www.fishwatch.gov/PollockIsPollock.html

We will keep that web address updated with new information as it comes in. However, please keep in mind that NOAA Fisheries has no authority over the many agencies involved in this change. We will do our best to keep this web page up to date, but buyers and sellers of seafood products are responsible for complying with all relevant laws and regulations.

For related information, please read [Yes, Virginia, Walleye Pollock is *Gadus chalcogrammus*](#).